

Non-Hierarchical Management

You want to get something done. But it's too big to do it by yourself, so you bring in some friends to help out. In your dreams, all your friends just "click", understand exactly what it is they're all supposed to do, and do it quickly and effectively. In reality, this almost never happens.

In order for any team to succeed, they need someone helping them all stay on track — someone who we will call a "manager".

The word manager makes many people uncomfortable. It calls up the image of a bossman telling you what to do and forcing you to slave away at doing it. That is not effective management.

A better way to think of a manager is as a servant, like an editor or a personal assistant. Everyone wants to be effective; a manager's job is to do everything they can to make that happen. The ideal manager is someone everyone would want to have.

Instead of the standard "org chart" with a CEO at the top and employees growing down like roots, turn the whole thing upside down. Employees are at the top — they're the ones who actually get stuff done — and managers are underneath them, helping them to be more effective. (The CEO, who really does nothing, is of course at the bottom.)

Most guides on management are written for big bosses at big companies, not people starting something new who want their team to be as effective as possible. (Hi, startup founders!) So herewith, a guide to effective non-hierarchical management.

Management is not a typical job. People who manage programmers don't spend their day programming. Nor do they spend their day writing memos. In fact, from the outside, it may appear like they don't spend their day doing very much at all. Don't be fooled.

Management is a serious job. It is incredibly difficult and wildly consuming. As an employee, if you miss a day off work, it's no big deal: some work doesn't get done and you (or someone else) has to catch up on it later. As a manager, it can become a serious problem — if you're not working, then the dozen people you serve aren't working effectively as well. It makes knocking off work to go to the fair a stressful proposition.

On the other hand, it can be incredibly rewarding. If you do your job right, you turn a group of individuals into a team, a group that's more effective than the sum of its parts. Together, you and your team can achieve amazing things. As a manager, your task is to serve the team — to make it as effective as it can possibly be, even if that means stepping on the toes of a few individuals.

One incredibly popular misconception is that managers are just there to provide "leadership" — you set everyone up, get them pointed in the right direction, and then let them go while you go back to the "real" stuff, whether it's building things yourself, meeting with funders, or going on the road and talking up your organization. Those are all perfectly valid jobs, but they are not management. You have to pick one. You cannot do both.

As the manager, it's your job to make sure things get done. This means you need a system for making sure things get done. This doesn't have to be anything fancy or complicated — a simple todo list will do — but simply trying to remember or writing yourself a note is not a system.

One of the nice things about having a system is it actually makes you less stressed out. Most people just keep their todo list somewhere in the back of their head. As things pile up, they become harder and harder to keep track of, and you become more stressed out about getting them all done or forgetting about them.

Simply writing them down on a list makes everything seem more manageable. You can see the things you have to do — really, there's not quite as many important ones as you thought — and you can put them in order and get that nice burst of satisfaction that comes from crossing them off.

Yes, it all sounds like silly, basic stuff, but it's important. Just having a list with all the stuff you need to do — and taking it seriously, actually going down it and checking stuff off every single day — is the difference between being a black hole of action items and being someone who actually Gets Stuff Done.

As a servant, it's crucial you know your masters well. You need to know what they're good at and what gives them trouble. You need to be able to tell when they're feeling good and when they're in a rut. And you need to have a safe enough relationship with them that they can be honest with you and come to you when they're in trouble. This is not easy. (You have to be willing to hear bad news about yourself.)

The most important piece is understanding what people are good at and what they like doing. A good first step is to just ask them, but often people are wrong or don't know. So you try giving them different things, seeing how they do at them, and adjusting accordingly.

But in addition to your team's professional skills, it's important to understand their personal goals. However much you may care about the work, at bottom it's still a job. You need to understand why your team members took it. Was it because it seemed interesting? Because it seemed worthwhile? Because it would give them valuable experience and help them get a better job down the road? It's important that you know, so you can make sure your tasks and expectations are in line with their goals.

You want the best working for you. People who aren't just good at their job, but people who are also good at *your* job. People you can trust to not just do something right but tell you that the way you suggested doing it was wrong. People you can rely on to get things done if you just stay out of their way. At least, that's the ideal. In practice, it's hard to find people like that and even when you do, they still need help.

I have never found the traditional methods of hiring — resumes, interviews, quizzes — to be helpful at all. Instead, I look at two things: what someone has done and whether I enjoy spending time with them. The first shows not just their talent but also their ability to execute. If they haven't made something interesting, whether as a side project or at a previous job, then they're probably not worth hiring. It's not *that* hard to sit down and accomplish something; be wary of people who haven't.

Similarly, you need to keep in mind that you're not just hiring a robot — you're hiring a flesh-and-blood human who you're going to need to spend a lot of time with during the day. That means they need to be someone you not just get along with, but enjoy being around. A formal interview, with all its stress and structure and contrivance, is a pretty bad environment for seeing if you like someone. Instead, just go get coffee and chat.

Everyone wants to work with their friends. After all, you have so much fun hanging out after work, why not hang out during work too? So they recruit their friends to work with them. (Or, even worse, they recruit their lovers.) But being friends is very different from being colleagues. All friends learn ways to adjust themselves to each other — which tones to use, which subjects to avoid, when to give each other space.

These go out the window when you're working together. You can't just not say things because they'll get your friend upset. So you say them, and they get upset, and you realize you have no way of dealing with each other when you're like this. It makes working together difficult, to say the least.

The situation is the same, but vastly worse, with couples. Plus, you're really screwed when your relationship falls apart under the stress.

If you do decide to work with people you're close with, you need to find a way to put your other relationship "on hold" while you work together. Which means you both need to be strong enough to be able to blow up at each other at work and then go out for drinks like nothing ever happened. If you can't do this (and few can), then either give up on the relationship or give up on the job.

The most extreme form of this, of course, is that you need to be able to fire your friend. Just because you like them doesn't mean they'll automatically be a good employee. And, sadly, there's really no way for you to know in advance. Bad employees are no less disastrous because they're your friends. Which means that if you hire a friend, you need to be able to fire them.

Conversely, don't become close friends with the people you work with. You have to set some personal boundaries: you're their manager, not their friend. Naturally, part of being a manager means that you have to talk to people about their personal problems and possibly even offer advice. After all, it's your job to make your team effective and if personal problems are distracting from that, you are going to have to face someone's personal problems.

But be sure to keep these problems at arm's length. Actually getting involved in someone's personal life or otherwise establishing a close personal relationship them is asking for trouble.

Your first job as a manager is to make sure everyone's on the same page. The team needs to understand what they're expected to do, why they're doing it, and who else is involved (funding it, using it, counting on it). If you picked a good team (point 2a), they'll hear this and find holes in your plan and catch things you hadn't thought of. (Which is good! Together, you can fix it.)

But real work can't begin until everyone's on board with the plan.

You're not managing a bunch of individual employees; you're managing a team. You're all trying to accomplish the same goal. It's the manager's job to make sure everyone's comfortable with each other. (Hint: Those dumb break-the-ice games do not make people *more* comfortable.) And while there's obviously a lot of feedback you need to give people one-on-one (*never* chew people out in front of a group), you should try to do a lot in front of the team as well.

It's easy to fall into a trap where you're just giving feedback individually. The result is that everyone feels isolated, not knowing where their work fits in to the bigger picture. Providing opportunities for everyone to see what everyone else is up to is crucial to making your team actually feel like it's a community, instead of just a group of your friends. (First law of friendship drift: Just because you like two people doesn't mean they'll automatically like each other.)

It's also a good opportunity to set a tone. You want people to treat each other like friends and colleagues, not backstabbing assholes or bickering siblings. As my friend Clay comments:

I have a "no asshole rule" which is really simple: I really don't want to work with assholes. So if you're an asshole and you work on my team, I'm going to fire you. Now, if the whole team says "gosh, that's awful. We want to work with as many assholes as we can!" then we have a simple solution. I'll fire me! (FYI: The "No Asshole Rule" is a book. I thought it was actually a pretty good book as far as Business books go. As far as I'm concerned, anybody could stand to read 100 pages giving them the MBA Book cover they need to say to their boss: let's get the assholes out of here.)

But a community is about more than just tone, there's process as well. You need to figure out how your team members work and how you can get them to work together. Some people like constant human feedback; others like locking themselves in a room for a couple hours and just getting something done. Everyone has their own habits and styles. Your job is to find an appropriate mix that makes everyone as productive they can be.

First, break the plan up into parts. Make sure everybody understands the parts.

Second, find a team member who wants to do each part. The key word here is *wants* — some things just have to get done, it's true, but things will get done much better by people who want to do them.

One of the weird facts of life is that for just about everything you hate doing, there is someone out there who loves doing it. (There are even people who get a real kick out of cleaning toilets.) You may not currently employ them and you may not be able to hire them, but there is the goal worth striving toward.

It's also important to realize that a lot of what makes a task attractive or unattractive is outside the task itself. Managing the company's accounting books at first seems like a pretty uninteresting job. But when you realize it makes you indispensable and gives you authority over how all the money is spent, it suddenly seems a little more exciting. Use your knowledge from point 2 to structure tasks in a way that's attractive to your team members.

Another thing to keep in mind is that most people like variety in their work. It's very tempting to think of someone as "the finance guy" and just give them all the finance-related tasks. But in any organization there's lots of different kinds of things to do and a wide mix of people to do it. Many people will appreciate the opportunity to switch up the kinds of things they do.

It's tempting to think that this is inefficient, that by having one guy do all the finance tasks they'll become an expert in it and the finance tasks will get done more effectively. And there's definitely some truth in it. But one of the best ways to be inefficient is to make your team unhappy. If doing something new makes someone enjoy their job more, it'll be well worth the cost in time of them having to learn how to do it.

Even better, their fresh perspective might just help you make improvements you'd never thought of before.

As the manager, it's a continual temptation to keep important jobs for yourself. After all, they're usually fun to do and doggone-it they're *important*, you can't risk them on somebody else! Resist the temptation.

For one thing, taking jobs for yourself is one way of distracting yourself from having to do actual management (point 1). But more importantly, you'll never be able to develop your team if you keep all the real responsibility for yourself. Sure, Jony may not be as good at meeting funders as you, but a lot of that's because she's never gotten a chance to practice. If it's something she wants to do (point 2), take her along and give him a chance to learn.

This is the bulk of what non-hierarchical management is about. You've got good people, they've got good responsibilities. Now it's your job to do everything in your power to help them get them done.

A good way to start is just by asking people what they need. Is their office too noisy? Did they get confused about something you said? Are they stuck on a particular problem? Are they overwhelmed with work? It's your job to help them out: get them a quieter office, clarify things, find them advice or answers, shift some stuff off their plate. They shouldn't be wasting time with things that annoy them; that's your job.

But you have to be proactive as well. People tend to suffer quietly, both because they don't want to come whining to you and just because when you're stuck in a rut all your attention is focused on the rut. A key part of being a manager is checking in with people, pointing out that they're stuck in a rut, and gently helping them out.

At any given time, there's lots of stuff that needs to be done. Part of your job is helping people decide what to tackle first. You don't want to be *too* didactic about it — people like choice and variety, they're not always so happy when you just give them one instruction after another — but even that's usually far preferable to being overwhelmed with stuff.

The best prioritization relationship is a dialogue: "OK, what's next?" someone asks. "Well, what about building the new sprocket management engine?" "Ugh, I'm too tired for that today." "OK, how about cleaning the frobnitz?" "Bo-ring." "Oh, I know! We need someone to document the doohickey." "Ooh, perfect — thanks!"

Procrastination is the crop blight of the office-work world. It affects just about everyone and it's very hard to fight alone. The single best way to stop procrastination is to sit down with someone and come up with the next concrete step they have to take and then start doing it together. There's something magical about having another person sit down with you and do something that can overcome procrastination's natural resistance. And once you get someone started, momentum can often carry them through the rest of the day.

Even if all you do is help people overcome procrastination, you will be well worth it.

White-collar work is lonely. You sit at a desk, staring at a screen, poking at buttons. It's easy to get lost and off-track and depressed. That's why it's important to check in and see how things are doing. Not only does it give you a chance to see how people are doing (point 5), it gives you a chance to see how things are coming and gently steer them back on course if they've drifted from what you've intended.

Remember, your job isn't to tell people *how* to do things; it's to help them get it done. Sometimes this means helping them figure out how to do it, but in general you should assume that you work with smart people and they'll be able to handle it themselves. Again, be a servant, not a boss.

Studies consistently show that people are much happier and more productive when they have control over the way they work. Never take that away.

As manager, people will often come to you to make decisions or resolve disputes. It's very tempting, with people looking up at you for guidance, to want to give your sage advice. But the fact is, even if (or especially if) as a manager you're held up on a pedestal, you probably know less about the question than anyone else on the team.

The worst managers don't just make decisions when people come to them, they parachute in and start dictating tiny details. The urge to do this can be overwhelming, but there are few things more disastrous to morale. If you really have to give input, couch it as such. And if people fight back, know when to step back and say "look, you're the expert. I was just giving my two cents." (Hint: It's right after they start fighting back.)

The best managers use these opportunities not to dictate an answer, but to have a Socratic dialogue to help figure out what the best answer is. Often when people are stuck on something, they really just need someone else to talk things over with, either for assistance or validation. Here's your chance to help.

Firing people is hard. It's probably the hardest thing you'll ever do. People go to absurd lengths to try and make it easier ("we'll just try him out for a month and see how it goes" is a common one) but they never really help. You just have to bite the bullet and let people go. It's your job. If you can't do it, find someone else.

Firing people isn't just about saving money, or petty things like that. It's the difference between a great organization and a failure. Ineffective people drag everyone else down to their level. They make it so that you can't take pride in what you're doing, so that you dread going into work in the morning, so that you can't rely on the other pieces of the project getting done. And assholes, no matter how talented they may be, are even worse. Conversely, there are few things more fun than working hard with a really nice, talented group of people.

You are never going to be able to tell whether someone is going to work out in advance. Assholes are sometimes easy to spot, but people can have great resumes, solid references, a charming interview style, and still be total failures. And the worst part is, there will always be excuses for their failures. "I know, I know," they'll say, "it's just that I've been really sick this week. I've been distracted with family things. I've been traveling. Look, I'm sorry. I promise I'll do better this week." I've said them all myself.

If you're not getting things done, you can always come up with excuses for why. Competent people get things done anyway. Ineffective ones let the excuses pile up. They're not going to leave themselves. You have to pull the trigger.

As the team's manager, there will be many opportunities where people will want to give you credit. And getting credit is nice, it makes you feel good. So you start coming up with excuses for why you deserve it, even though you didn't do any of the work. "Well, it was my vision," you will say. "I was the one who made it all happen."

But think of all those talented people slaving away at desks. They were the ones who actually made it happen. Make sure they get the credit. And not in a facetious, “thanks to all the little people way”. No, you need to own up. You are the assistant. They did all the work. As Clay says, “A manager’s worst enemy is his or her own ego.”

Spending your days doing grunt work for people who are smarter than you. Obsessing over their mood and personal problems. Turning down all opportunities to take credit or get attention so you can continue to work as a servant. Does this really sound like a job you want?

Probably not. Few people are cut out for it. It’s really hard. It’s incredibly stressful. It’s not at all glamorous.

But it’s vitally important. A team without a manager is doomed to be an ineffective team. So if you can’t do it, find somebody else.

Thanks to [Clay Johnson](#) and [Emmett Shear](#) for their comments on drafts of this essay.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

February 16, 2009